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ABSTRACT

South Dakota's graduation rate in 1986-87 was above the national average: 79.7% compared to 71.1%. The dropout rate for 1990 was 4.3%. Of 180 districts, 25 with large numbers of Native Americans have a dropout rate of over 7%. Increasing the rates of graduation for Native American students will require a comprehensive, long-range program. Schools need to break down the barriers between school and real life by using the model of adult learning: working cooperatively on complex tasks of significant duration; and bringing to every problem all intellectual resources. This paper discusses the problems relating to dropouts, and suggests a number of approaches to teaching young people how to learn: (1) expanding the community as a focus of study; (2) redesigning courses or curricula to include entrepreneurship education, so students learn to create as well as to get jobs; (3) creating opportunities for monitored work experiences, including cooperative education, internships, apprenticeships, pre-employment training and youth-operated enterprises; (4) designing community and neighborhood service opportunities that include individual voluntary efforts and youth-guided service programs; (5) redirecting vocational education to offer students hands-on methodology for jobs of the future; (6) providing incentives such as guarantees of postsecondary and continuing education, employment, and training; (7) offering career information and counseling, exposing young people to job opportunities and career options; (8) showing more flexibility on district and state levels in allowing young people over the age of 18 to return to high school; and (9) encouraging closer cooperation between high schools and post-secondary institutions including dual enrollment. (ALL)

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DROPPING OUT: WHY DO SOUTH DAKOTA STUDENTS JUST SAY NO TO SCHOOL AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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(1990)

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DROPPING OUT: WHY DO SOUTH DAKOTA STUDENTS JUST SAY NO TO SCHOOL AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

The nation must dramatically reduce its dropout rate and 75 percent of those students who do drop out will successfully complete a high school degree or its equivalent.

The gap in high school graduation rates between American students from minority backgrounds and their non-minority counterparts will be eliminated.

INTRODUCTION

Who drops out of school in South Dakota and why? How do these numbers compare to the rest of the country? Drop out rates are collected by virtually all states, but it's almost impossible to compare rates across states because each uses different methods of calculating. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education scheme, which takes the number of public high school graduates and divide that number by the ninth-grade enrollment of four years earlier, then adjusting for interstate migration and unclassified students (that is, students in programs like special education who are not grouped by grade level).

There are problems with this method: it does not take into account students who drop out before the ninth grade; students who transfer to and from private schools or, importantly in South Dakota, schools run by the BIA; students who graduate early; or state differences in counting as graduates students who obtain certificates of completion, special education diplomas or GED diplomas.

The news for South Dakota is mixed. The good news is that in 1986-1987 (the last year for which national statistics are available), the graduation rate was well above that of the U.S. as a whole, 79.7 percent compared to 71.1 percent.

So, out of every 100 students in South Dakota who enrolled as freshmen in 1982, almost 80 graduated. The South Dakota State Department of Education, however, says this year's dropout rate averages much less than that. They quote a statewide average of 4.3 percent (which would be 17.3 percent over four years), so that of the students who were freshmen in 1986, 84 graduated this spring. They also note that there are only 25 of the 180 districts that are over seven percent (a cumulative rate of more than 28 percent over four years), and those are schools with large numbers of Native American students.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

So the problem is simple, right? According to your data, South Dakota is near the governors' goal:

> By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

We need only find a way to keep six of every hundred freshmen in school for four more years and the job is done. How hard can six students per hundred be?

Let's look at the objectives and see if they are easy too. The first one says:

> The nation must dramatically reduce its dropout rate and 75 percent of those students who do drop out will successfully complete a high school degree or its equivalent.

In South Dakota, that will mean that eventually seven and a half more students will complete a degree, or get a GED, or something. Piece of cake, especially since we don't have those statistics now, so the only way we can go is up, right?

What remains is the second objective:

> The gap in high school graduation rates between American students from minority backgrounds and their non-minority counterparts will be eliminated.

We'll figure out a way to increase Native American rates of graduation and be finished early this afternoon.

I wish it were that simple, but its not that easy, for three reasons. Let's begin at the end.

1. Increasing the rates of graduation for Native American students will require a comprehensive, long-range and expensive program for which there may not be the resources of political and social will in this (or any other) state.

   As we will see what seems like a simple, individual act, dropping out, is the result of a complex interaction between the student's understanding of economics, the expectations of home, culture and school, health, motivation and esteem issues, and the success he or she has in school. Interventions in any single area are unlikely to be productive, short term interventions don't work so we are left with complex, long-term interventions in a number of areas, all of which will be expensive.

2. We assume that it is a good thing for all South Dakota students, not just Native Americans, to graduate from high school because it has economic benefits to the individual and the state, and because a high school education prepares students to participate in the democratic process as contributing members of society. Neither of these assumptions may be true, and examining each of them is part of your task as well.

3. Finally, in South Dakota as in the rest of the country, we need to be just as concerned about the students who are psychologically dropping out of school, even as they take up desk space and put in the time required for a diploma. Dropping out may mean physically leaving school, but it also means being only physically and not psychologically present. We are losing our best and brightest hopes for the future because they are not challenged, not learning to stretch themselves and to aspire to excellence.

Your task is to discuss these goals and make recommendations to the Governor on how South Dakota will meet them. This is no easy job, for under the seeming straightforward goal are deeply buried structures of how we think and act.

How many of you know people who didn't finish high school with their class? Why? and When? (solicit reasons from audience and list on newsprint). Let's talk about each of those reasons briefly.

Economics. In our parent's generation, dropping out of school to contribute to family income was common and, in many ways, socially acceptable. There was a large market for unskilled or manual or farm labor and opportunities to learn on the job. Today, more than half of the high school juniors hold jobs, 38 percent working from one to 20 hours a week and 16 percent working more than 20 hours a week.[1]

Education is undervalued. For Native Americans, for members of other minority groups and for many poor white Americans, the school experiences of adults have been so unsatisfactory, that there is little reason for them to believe they will be any more useful for children. Parents who are themselves poorly educated and/or stressed by other factors do not or cannot provide early experiences that build either academic school readiness or confidence in their children that they can learn and that learning is important.

Teen-age pregnancy is commonly thought of as a cause for dropping out or being pushed out of school for young women. My guess is that many of you will remember when students were expelled when they became obviously pregnant and, although this policy is changing, pregnancy is still often suggested as the reason young women leave school.

Lack of achievement. Some students don't drop out, they flunk out or fail to achieve to an extent that their enrollment seems pointless to the school and the student. Many districts have policies about minimal attendance and achievement levels students must maintain if they are to continue to be enrolled, which tend to speed decisions to leave on the part of students.

This is bogus (lack of relevance). There is an increasing number of students, usually the very bright, creative ones, whose achievement is adequate, although under what we think they are capable of, who voluntarily leave when they can't see the relevance in staying in school for their "real lives".

I don't care (lack of motivation and inschool dropouts). Finally, there are the psychological dropouts, those students who don't show up in the statistics but who

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[1] Rothman, R. Jobs' Link with Academic Harm Disputed. Education Weekly, March 6, 1989.

are deprived of rich learning experiences, nevertheless. They finish school and graduate, but have wasted their time and taxpayers money, taking up space when more satisfying learning experiences could have been arranged, both by their local schools and outside the system. These turned-off students can be found in almost every class in almost every school, from the largest to the smallest, and my guess is that you all could name at least one person who fits this category, maybe including yourselves.

Lets go back and look at each of the factors we've identified and think together about what they really mean and what kind of recommendations you might make that would address the issues. We'll begin with economic factors.

ECONOMIC FACTORS: THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

Concern about students dropping out of high school is relatively new, for it is only in the past 25 years that we as a society haven't agreed that one of the purposes of school is to sort out winners and losers, and the way schools operate suggests that that agreement is far from universal. The generation that began school in the late forties and early fifties were the first for whom dropping out was perceived of as a problem. We were told to stay in school because it would increase our economic success. A high school diploma was a clear route out of poverty.

Lizabeth Schoor says

> Earlier in this century, the routes up and out of poverty were imperfect, and they worked less well for blacks than for whites, but they were plentiful. Most poor and otherwise disadvantaged families lived in an environment that provided day-to-day evidence that hard work, ambition, and perseverance brought rewards--reflecting in large part the expanding demands for unskilled labor. One long-term study of white men born in the late 1920s found that those who came from chronically dependent, multiproblem families were indistinguishable, by the age forty-seven, from men of more favored family backgrounds.[2]

Changes in the labor market demand and in the nature of the economy have rerouted or shut off routes up and out of poverty for most lower class individuals

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[2] Schorr, L. (1989). Within our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday. page 18.

and, we begin to fear, for many individuals now in the middle class, especially in rural America.

The fastest growing sector in the economy and the source of much labor demand is the service sector, home of low paying, repetitive jobs requiring little skill and on-the-job training. Service sector jobs are notoriously dead end jobs or jobs with flat career ladders. Beginning in the mail room and working one's way up to President of the company may be a legend of the past: flipping burgers has the potential of working one's way up to crew chief but not of owning the franchise.

When employers were themselves local and businesses operated on a small scale, one route out of poverty was to begin working while in school, become a known and valued employee to an employer who took a personal interest in you and your future, and grow into increasingly more responsible positions. When ownership is absentee, employment policies corporate and centralized and headquarters at a distance, that route is closed.

Some employers use high school diplomas as a screening device for almost every full time job, whether or not the job requires a high school education. When this happens, dropping out does have significant long term economic disadvantages. Across the country, dropouts are seven and a half times as likely as graduates to be dependent on welfare, twice as likely to be unemployed and twice as likely to live in poverty. The disparity between dropouts and graduates increases each year.[3] So it would seem in the best interests of the young person to stay in school on economic grounds.

- In 1986, civilian males age 20-24 who did not graduate from high school had real earnings of $6,853 compared to $10,924 for high school graduates.
- These earnings, however, represented a decline of 25.8 percent from adjusted earnings in 1973.
- For non-high school graduates, the decline was even larger, 42.2 percent.[4]

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[3] Op. cit., page 8.

[4] William T. Grant Foundation. (1988) The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families.

Unfortunately, most young people don't figure longterm lifetime earnings like the economists do. They see the possibility of work right now and recognize, from listening and watching their parents and other adults around, that the economic plight of all workers in rural America is grim and getting grimmer, reducing that longterm economic advantage of staying in school.

- o Nearly one in three nonmetro workers paid by the hour received wages at or near the minimum wage in 1987, a proportion far larger than among metro workers.[5]

- o In 1979, some 31.9 percent of nonmetro workers earned a wage too low to lift a family of four out of poverty even with full time, year around work, but by 1987, that proportion had grown to 42.1 percent.[6]

- o After adjusting for inflation, the purchasing power of the minimum wage in 1898 was at its lowest level since 1949, and many workers in small businesses and agriculture are not even covered by minimum wage.

- o The fastest growing segment of the poor in America are white rural families with two employed wagearners.[7]

The larger economic picture has a great deal to do with the issue of dropouts in South Dakota, for the underlying problem we are all really worried about is how to prepare students for productive adult lives. We've taken as an article of faith that a high school diploma is the first step, yet what is becoming clear is that all of us who live in rural states like South Dakota are in economic peril. We need to design and fight for economic policies that revitalize rural America's total economy. School success and economic health are interdependent.

Schools have played an important sorting function, and continue to do that. At the beginning of the century, Harvard President Charles William Eliot believed that,

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[5] Hendrickson, S.E & Sawhill, I. (1989). Assisting the Working Poor. Changing Domestic Priorities Discussion Paper. The Urban Institute.

[6] Shapiro, I. & Greenstein, R. (1989). Fulfilling Work's Promise: Policies to Increase Incomes of the Rural Working Poor. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

[7] Shapiro, I. (1989). Laboring for Less: Working but Poor in Rural America. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

"elementary school teachers ought to sort the pupils by their evident or probable destinies"[8] so that people who were going to earn a living doing unskilled labor weren't perceived to need a high school diploma.

The school's function was to sort out economic winners and losers, sending those young people who would do unskilled labor directly into the work force at an early age. While the need for unskilled labor in this country has greatly lessened, the sorting function remains today. It has taken a nasty turn, however. We now don't sort by what kind of job we think a student will do, we sort by what kind of income his or her parents have. According to a comprehensive analysis of the nation's report card on student performance, more than 61 percent of variance in test scores can be accounted for by the proportion of a state's children living below the poverty line.[9] Thus, it comes as no surprise that the lowest achievement rates and highest dropout rates come in counties in South Dakota with the poorest people. Improving the general economic health of the State will improve outcomes for students in schools, but we need to understand those connections and decide that that's important.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS: HOW DO YOU GET TO BE AN ADULT AROUND HERE ANYWAY?

School people are often quick to blame parents and cultures other than their own for low expectations of students and little value ascribed to education. These accusations may have some validity, particularly among parents whose own experience with school has been negative. Children of parents without a high school education are twice as likely as their schoolmates to be nonreaders.[10] In fact, what Schoor calls "rotten outcomes for students" are interdependent and can be culturally or sociologically bound. They include combinations of persistent low income, inadequate education, long-term unemployment, unstable family

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[8] Lazerson, M. and Grubb, W. N. (1974). American Education and Vocationalism. New York: Teachers College Press.

[9] Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis, University of Missouri, Columbia personal communication March, 1989.

[10] Schoor, page 11.

relationships (including teenage childbearing and single parenting), and behavior patterns and norms deviating from those of mainstream populations.[11]

What that means is that some students come to school behind at age four, five or six. Their vocabularies, the number of words that they use or understand, may be fewer than half those of children from more favored circumstances. Even more importantly, their ability to extract concepts and put thoughts together may be seriously delayed, as a function of delayed language development and living in environments where they don't get to practice talking and thinking with caring adults. Their belief in themselves, their confidence in their ability to learn things that are important for them to learn, may be diminished if they have been raised in environments that do not support them, that do not tell them they are cherished and competent people. Finally, if parents haven't found school important for them, they have little reason to pass on to their children the message that education has value. You will want to coordinate with and support the work of the group dealing with school readiness, for preventing dropouts begins early, before children enter school and even, in some cases, before they are born.

TEEN PREGNANCY AND OTHER HEALTH AND SELF ESTEEM ISSUES: WHEN WILL I BE LOVED?

Teen pregnancy is often suggested as the primarily reason that females leave school before graduation, yet statistics show that only one in five female students who drop out do so because they are pregnant (and isn't it interesting that we never think to ask whether males drop out because they are about to become or are fathers?).

- The school age mother who has to cope with one or more babies will earn less than half the income of women who become mothers later, and is likely to have a higher-than-average number of children.

- Their children are also spaced more closely together, and by the time teenage mothers are twenty-nine, they are likely to have more children than they want, although their classmates do not.[12]

We all know that wanted babies have the best start. Babies born to teenage mothers

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[11] Schoor, page 16.

[12] Schoor, page 12.

> ...are born into peril. (They are) more likely than other babies to have physical problems at birth, to be born prematurely, at low birthweight, in generally fragile health, in need of expensive neonatal intensive care, and at risk of cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, and other handicaps. This is less often the result of physiological immaturity than of adequate prenatal care and the lack of social and economic support characteristic of most teenage pregnancies.
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> The risk of physical problems is only the beginning. More damaging consequences for the child of a teenager flow from the high chance of being raised by a single mother who is poor and unready for parenthood. Children of unmarried teenagers are four times as likely as children in other families to be poor,...and to stay poor for a long time. Before they reach the age of nine, 70 percent of children born to mothers under eighteen have spent part of their childhoods in single-parent households.
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> Teenage parenthood may impose its heaviest burden on the next generation when it comes of age. ...as a group, they are in substantially worse shape academically, emotionally, and socially, than the children born to otherwise similar women in their twenties. They are more likely to have children themselves while still adolescents, their school dropout rates are higher, their achievement is lower, and they are more frequently retained in grade. The children of teenage mothers also start sexual activity earlier than their peers, are more frequently suspended from school, and more often run away from home, get drunk, and hurt someone seriously.[13]

Teenage pregnancy does not spring from a lack of information or access to birth control in this age of condom advertisements on television and displays in supermarket aisles. Rather, it is often a response to a yearning for commitment, for love and acceptance that is not available elsewhere, as a proof of adult status. Given the implications for future generations, the pain is not just personal and private, confined to the young parents and their families. The risks to the children, and to our collective future, requires a societal response that includes better counseling and education, classes in parenting for both young mothers and fathers, support from the community for young parents to continue their educations including provisions for day care for their children, and the prospect of meaningful, economically rewarding employment once they complete school.

LACK OF ACHIEVEMENT: DROP OUT BEFORE YOU FLUNK OUT

Public education in this country grew out of the tradition of a group of parents banding together voluntarily to provide education for their children. Since this was originally a voluntary association, the people who started the community

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[13] Schoor, page 14-15.

school shared common goals and values. They held common expectations for the behavior of the teacher and the students. As our society changed, the principles underlying universal education were adopted and the schools were required to serve all the children of all the people. As we have seen, they did that more or less well, and some students won and some lost. The gap between what schools expect of students, what behavior is tolerated at home and what they are able to achieve widens as the student population broadened and changed. Because schools remain organized around white, middle class standards and assumptions, students from other cultures and classes may not feel welcome. They react to an unpleasant situation the way that every human being does, they avoid it. Truancy becomes an issue, as does misbehavior.

When parents and teachers don't present a united front of common, high expectations for student achievement and behavior, young people are quick to understand and exploit the differences. Parental expectations play a central role, and, as we have noted, parents with poor personal experiences with schools often don't expect that the schools will really benefit their children, and, too often, they have been right.

However, the expectations of the schools themselves can contribute to lowered achievement and dropping out, through what Gary Sykes calls "The Deal".

> The Deal can be struck with a few disruptive students or with a whole class. It can pervade an entire school. Its essence is "You don't bother me and I won't bother you. You can do only token work. You can spend the hour daydreaming. But do so quietly. So long as you stifle your heartfelt desire to spread disorder, I will give you a passing grade.[14]

"The Deal" can go on throughout a student's career and not contribute to dropping out, I suppose. What more commonly happens is that the student feels the lack of respect, the contempt that underlies this position and comes to recognize that a teacher or system that makes "The Deal" has already abandoned him or her. (Please note here that "The Deal" is expanded for girls to include "and I don't expect you to question much, or to do well at male subjects like science or math, so I won't push or encourage you." At this point, dropping out is merely a physical recognition of a mental and emotional act that has taken place the moment "The

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[14] Sykes, G. (New Year's, 1984). The Deal. Wilson Quarterly, pages 59-77.

Deal" was struck. Indeed, the best predictor of who will eventually drop out of school are reading scores in the third grade!

Addressing this problem includes more training for teachers in cultural differences and learning styles, a commitment on the part of schools and communities to the notion that all children can learn and are valuable members of the society, that each of us has an investment in each of them, for they are our futures.

THIS IS BOGUS: LACK OF RELEVANCE AND MOTIVATION

Students drop out, or perceive themselves pushed out, by a system that just doesn't mean anything to them. The lack of connections between the curriculum and what they perceive as "real life" is so great as to be unbridgeable and they make a decision that seems very clearly to them to be in their self interest, to leave and get about living. This is particularly true of those non-college bound students that have come to be known as "the forgotten half."

Schools currently do a terrible job teaching young people how to learn, if the research on how adults learn is any indication and a number of researchers think it is. Adults learn and work with one another, cooperatively instead of individually as in the current school model. They work together on complex tasks of significant duration, not tasks that are fragmented and limited by 50-55 minute class periods. They bring to every problem everything they know, not dividing their intellectual resources by saying this is/is not math or science or English. The response of schools must be to break down the barriers between education and the world of work, between school and real life. There are a number of approaches to be considered including:

- o expanding the community as a focus of study, as Belle Fourche is attempting now in a McREL-sponsored project;
- o redesigning courses or curricula to include entrepreneurship eduction, so students learn to create as well as get jobs as several South Dakota schools are doing in a project co-sponsored by the Black Hills Special Services Cooperative and McREL;
- o creating opportunities for monitored work experiences, including cooperative education, internships, apprenticeships, pre-employment training and youth-operated enterprises;
- o designing community and neighborhood service opportunities (which may be undertaken for graduation credit) that include individual voluntary efforts and youth-guided service programs;

- o redirecting vocational education to offer students hands-on methodology for jobs of the future, a valuable way to acquire basic skills and general abilities they will need to be successful in a wide range of endeavors;

- o providing incentives, such as guarantees of postsecondary and continuing education, guaranteed employment and guaranteed training supported by personal adult attention to young people;

- o offering career information and counseling, exposing young people to job opportunities and career options as well as successful adult models;

- o showing more flexibility on district and state levels in allowing young people over the age of 18 to return to high school, encouraging "dropping in" as well a dropping out (following the trend in higher education where "non-traditional", that is older, less than full time students now far outnumber the students who are between the ages of 18-22);

- o encouraging closer cooperation between high schools and post-secondary institutions, including dual enrollment (now possible in some South Dakota programs) such as the science and math School Without Walls projects for advanced course offerings for small, rural schools through which students receive both high school and college credit for successful course completion (a federally-sponsored pilot project, cooperatively run through McREL and the University of South Dakota).

Now that all this news, both good and bad, is before you, your job is to make recommendations about how South Dakota will address its dropout problem. You might begin by letting your minds range into the adult world for metaphors, for the problem is complex, and tackling any single aspect of it is unlikely to bring you to the results you wish.

In situations like this, metaphors are often useful, for they give us new ways to think about thorny, complex situations. Do any of you golf and belong to a country club? If you aren't expert, on any given day or even over your career, you don't get thrown out of the club nor are your forced or encouraged to resign. Suppose we thought of schools (or life) as learning clubs. Then we could each come and practice among friends, who would offered helpful advice. There would be a pro for specific lessons. We would each work, throughout our lives, to be our personal bests. The developmentalists say that play is a child's work. Perhaps South Dakota can lead the rest of us in thinking about learning, and helping others to continue to learn, as our life's work.

The problem, as we have seen, is not only that students drop out of school, but that they can't drop in again. We need to think of new ways to make the dropping in as learners easier for all of us.